

## WILLIAM AND JOHN HUNTER \*

### A STUDY IN CONTRASTS

FRANCIS R. PACKARD  
Philadelphia

The lives of the Hunter brothers extended over exactly the same number of years, William, born in 1718, and dying in 1783; John, born in 1728, dying in 1793. Their early training differed greatly. William was destined for the ministry and was sent to Glasgow University at the early age of thirteen years. After studying there for five years he gave up the gown for the scalpel and began to study medicine with William Cullen, with whom he worked for three years, also attending some courses of lectures at the medical school of the University of Edinburgh. In 1740 he went to London where he worked first under Smellie, the leading obstetrician of his day in London, and then with James Douglas, the discoverer of "Douglas' pouch" of the peritoneum. He studied anatomy also under Frank Nichols, Mead's son-in-law and one of the best teachers of his time. After going to Paris and studying anatomy in Paris, William Hunter returned to London and in 1746 started giving private courses in anatomy, "in the same manner as at Paris," which meant that the students were given the opportunity actually to dissect and make anatomical preparations on the human body, instead of, as had heretofore been the case in London, being taught by means of dried preparations, casts and drawings. His school was successful from the start. John Hunter was a boy of thirteen when his father died. His mother was too indulgent and he was allowed to do pretty much as he pleased and not given any very regular schooling. In 1748 he asked William to take him into his school and from that time for eleven years he passed the time in his brother's school, except during the summer season when the school was closed and he worked at surgery, first in

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Chelsea Hospital, later at St. Bartholomew's and finally at St. George's Hospital. The characters of the two brothers were essentially different. William was sensitive, refined and cultivated. He had received an excellent education at Glasgow and his early training as a man-midwife with Smellie and Douglas had tended to give him a correct professional bearing. He frequented the salons of the literati and the halls of the learned societies, collected rare books, statues and works of art. John on the other hand passed his time in the dissecting rooms or hospital wards and was not at all choice in the selection of his companions. He was a hard drinker in these years and given to coarse language and the frequent use of oaths. John's anatomical skill was early recognized not only by his brother who appointed him demonstrator in his school a year after he joined him, but also by others for, in 1753, he and Percival Pott were elected to read the anatomical lectures at Surgeons' Hall, a remarkable tribute to his reputation as Pott was already surgeon at St. Bartholomew's and John Hunter had only begun his studies five years before. Meanwhile William Hunter was the leading obstetrician in London. He was surgeon-midwife to Middlesex Hospital and to the British Lying-in-Hospital, and Physician-Extraordinary to Queen Charlotte.

It was during the period between 1748 and 1759 that the Hunters did their most remarkable work in anatomy. The two brothers were a wonderful team to run an anatomical school. William Hunter was a scholar, thoroughly grounded in anatomy and an eloquent lecturer. John was rough of speech, uncouth in manner, and an impatient master, but unequalled in his knowledge of practical anatomy and skill as a dissector. During these years there is no doubt, as candidly acknowledged on many occasions by William, John did most of the practical work upon which William based his lectures, full of original views.

The first publication which was made of their researches was William Hunter's "Medical Commentaries" which was put forth in 1762. It contained the demonstrations of the

accurate anatomy of the lachrymal ducts and the tubuli seminiferi; the first actual proof of the real nature of congenital hernia, and the demonstration of the fact that the lymphatics constituted a separate absorptive system. Unfortunately this book is marred by invectives against the Monros whom William accused of stealing his ideas and the fruits of his labors.

In 1759 John's health was impaired and he obtained a commission in the army and went on the expedition against Belleisle, and later into Spain. He returned to London in 1763, but for some unknown reason did not resume his position as his brother's assistant. Instead he branched out for himself. In 1768 he was elected surgeon to St. George's Hospital and after Percival Pott's death he was recognized as the foremost London surgeon of his time. Besides having house-pupils he gave courses in surgery and anatomy. In 1767 he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society, three months before William was thus honored. Yet in spite of various indications of a rift in the lute the brothers were on friendly terms as William allowed John to give some lectures in his rooms as late as 1777, and they saw one another frequently. The final break in their fraternal relations came in 1780. Six years before, in 1774, William Hunter had published his great work the "Gravid Uterus," printed by Baskerville, with superb illustrations by Van Rymsdyk. In it he described for the first time the correct anatomical relations between the uterus and the placenta. John Hunter made no public comment on the work until 1780 when he wrote a letter to the Royal Society in which he claimed that he had first shown this relationship to his brother in 1754, and that in the latter's book he had appropriated the discovery and made no mention of his, John's, part in it. William Hunter wrote a reply also addressed to the Royal Society but that body refused to take part in the quarrel and did not publish the letters in their transactions. No one has ever satisfactorily solved the mystery as to why John waited six years before he published his complaint. William died March 30, 1783.

John visited him as he lay on his deathbed, but the reconciliation came too late. John did not attend his brother's funeral. Ten years later, October 16, 1793, John Hunter died in an attack of angina pectoris. Both brothers left huge collections of great value and interest. William's contained not only anatomical preparations but a magnificent library of manuscripts and books, and a great collection of antique gems and objects of art. He bequeathed it to the University of Glasgow. John Hunter's collection of specimens illustrating human and comparative anatomy and pathology was purchased by the Government and given into the custody of the Royal College of Surgeons of London. Both of these collections are of the greatest value and they illustrate the difference in the characters of their two collectors as clearly as could be wished. William the scholar, dilettante and art collector, as well as anatomist; John the original investigator, whose own hands prepared or directed the preparation of most of the specimens contained in his collection.